

GOVERNMENT MEETING WITH A. C. T. U.

Statement by the Prime Minister, The Right Honourable W. McMahon, M. P.

The Prime Minister said tonight that a meeting had been held today between representatives of the Government and the A. C. T. U.

At the meeting Members of the Government were - the Prime Minister, the Treasurer, the Minister for Labour and National Service and the Attorney-General. The A. C. T. U. was represented by the President, Mr. Hawke, the Secretary Mr. Souter, and the Honorary Vice-President Mr. Petrie.

Mr. McMahon, opening the discussions said there were three major issues.

He wished to remove two misunderstandings of the Government's attitude. First to the A. C. T. U. Congress decision of September 1969. The Congress decision was that "pending the outcome of discussions with the Commonwealth Government, Unions are advised not to meet any fines imposed under the Penal Clauses of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act...."

Mr. McMahon said that in the Government's opinion when the long discussions over dispute settlement procedures successfully concluded in May 1970 there remained no obstacle imposed on the Unions by the Congress to the payment of the fines.

The second misunderstanding related to the recent discussions on 11 February between the Government and the A. C. T. U. concerning the state of the economy. At that meeting the A. C. T. U. representatives said that they were prepared to enter discussions with representatives of the Government and employers as to ways in which a wage and price pause could be achieved, accompanied by a reduction in labour stoppages.

The President of the A. C. T. U. said, however, this was a matter for consideration by his Executive, but the A. C. T. U. was normally prepared to enter discussions.

It has been inferred by the A. C. T. U. representatives that this implied that no action would be taken on the fines until these discussions were completed. In fact the payment of the fines was not discussed at this meeting and it was never intended that they should be included in any talks arising from that meeting.

It is worth recalling that the President of the A. C. T. U. was not in the position to discuss the fines at that time because the Interstate Executive meeting with control of the matter was set down for the week commencing 22 February.

The second major issue was that in the interests of industrial sanity in Australia it was essential that the Arbitration Commission should be effectively maintained.

The Government is deeply concerned with this problem because it believes the Arbitration System must be preserved in the interest of the community and the very large numbers of the work force who depend for the protection of their minimum wages and conditions of employment on the Commonwealth Arbitration System. More than 90% of the Australian work force are covered by Commonwealth and State Arbitration tribunals.

The third major issue is the Government's intention to require payment of fines and will continue the procedures necessary before those fines can be collected.

The Government accepted that, in order to maintain complete good faith with the A. C. T. U. it would agree to a special meeting of the NLAC being called on or about 15 April to have discussions which were requested at the meeting of the NLAC on Monday 22 March. Within seven days of the commencement of the special meeting the A. C. T. U. and employers will have the right to make further representations to the Government.

Action to enforce collection will be deferred until after the NLAC meeting on or about 15 April.

CANBERRA

25 MARCH 1971